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RESEARCH PAPER

## **Education in Crisis: Covid-19 and Primary Education During the Pandemic in Nigeria**

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**ENYENAWEH**

Research: Innovation: Impact



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## *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

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The advent of the Covid-19 crisis in 2020 resulted in nationwide school closures across Nigeria. It necessitated a transition in learning delivery methods, from school to home learning. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, only about 55% of students participated in learning activities while at home. The majority were from private schools and wealthier homes. The statistics are alarming because over 70% of primary school students in Nigeria are enrolled in the public school system.

State Governments and some supporting organizations implemented specific interventions to aid primary school home learning. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2020) and The Education Partnership Centre on learning in a pandemic (TEP, 2020) carried out surveys around these interventions. These surveys helped to evaluate the effectiveness of the home learning strategies implemented. Research findings showed that in the face of crisis and the inability to be in school physically, the lack of resources and the socio-economic backgrounds of many households made home learning for most students very difficult. Students faced constraints, primarily because of the low-income financial backgrounds of a majority of families. The lack of basic amenities in poorer households hindered effective home learning. Additionally, the Covid-19 crisis also affected the ability of the girl child (UN, 2020) and children living with disabilities ability to learn effectively.

The inability to effectively learn at home by a majority creates learning and development gaps as their counterparts leave them behind. The crisis highlighted the inflexibility of the education system to adapt to change in the face of crisis effectively. The data shows an apparent and deepening socio-economic divide within the primary education system. Furthermore, reports indicate that low-quality school governance and the inability to learn at home has affected the out-of-school population rate. Many of the initiatives were not as effective due to constraints faced. However, there are some exceptions, such as the Edobest@Home program. It is a State-based initiative by the Edo State Government, which is primarily technology-driven. There is a need for the primary education system in Nigeria to shift from traditional teaching methods, incorporate technology in its processes and focus on quality delivery and learning outcomes nationally.

Therefore recommendations were made towards the adoption of a more flexible learning system that incorporate the use of low and high technology solutions, which are adaptable in the face of crisis and beneficial to a large majority.

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### *CONTEXT*

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Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a novel disease that emerged in late 2019. It rapidly spread to different parts of the world, resulting in a global pandemic (UNDP, 2020). Nigeria was among the first countries in Sub-Saharan Africa to identify cases of COVID-19 (NBS, 2020). Over 164000 instances of the virus and over 2000 deaths have been recorded in Nigeria to date (Google News, 2021). The government implemented strict measures from the early stages of the virus in Nigeria to prevent its spread, and various sectors were largely impacted. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, global oil prices plunged by 60% following the spread of the pandemic; this was heavy for Nigeria, as a bulk of the government revenue is attributed to the oil sector (NBS, 2020). The pandemic largely affected employment and income. According to a survey carried out by the National Bureau of Statistics, about 49% of the respondents reported they were not working because of the outbreak. Over 79% reported a decrease in household income. Apart from the economic impact that the outbreak had, a sector that was likewise primarily affected was the education sector, as children stayed at home due to school closures across the nation.

The importance of education for the effective development of a country cannot be overemphasized. Every child, regardless of their circumstance, has a right to quality basic education. Primary education in Nigeria is said to be free and compulsory, but the Nigerian Primary Education system has suffered over the years due to a myriad of factors, such as insufficient funding and infrastructure, inadequate learning aids and classrooms, ineffective learning and delivery methods, limited access to technology, etc. (Odia & Omofonmwan, 2007). Furthermore, there is a constant threat to schooling, emanating from insecurity across the nation. The education system, which was already a significant concern, took an enormous hit in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, which introduced new problems and challenges, exposed the depth of socio-economic inequalities, had an impact on learning outcomes and development, and affected the number of out-of-school children. In March 2020, a lockdown was initiated in Nigeria, which resulted in about 46 million

children being out of school due to school closures (EIEWG, 2020). The inability to physically be in school meant a disruption in the normal learning process, which brought about the need for interventions to address the challenge.

School closures resulting from the Covid-19 crisis kindled a need to address the learning disruptions experienced globally, nationally and across various levels of education. No longer having physical contact meant that new methods had to be adopted to disseminate information. On a large scale, the fastest way to reach many people is through the adoption and utilization of technology. Conversely, various states in Nigeria launched state-based initiatives to cushion the effect of the crisis on the education system and enable continuous learning. This was mainly for the benefit of primary school children in public schools. These initiatives majorly included broadcasting recorded lessons on TV and Radio across various states. Students were expected to watch or listen to the lessons to keep up with the curriculum. For this to be effective, it required electricity to be available and stable at the time of the broadcast to utilize the devices. However, this system did not provide a method of assessment and feedback or contact with teachers, which is essential, especially for primary school children who require closer attention when learning. In May 2020, about 81% of households that participated in a survey carried out by the National Bureau of Statistics reported no contact with teachers (NBS, 2020). Having a system of engagement, assessment and feedback to achieve learning outcomes remotely requires levels of technology. A one-way stream of communication cannot accomplish this.

In a society that is already struggling in terms of access to resources, devices, and large-scale access to the internet and electricity, keeping pace with a technology shift is extremely hindered. Some private schools in Nigeria have been able to keep up and adopt technology and utilize platforms that provide virtual classrooms, video conferencing, animated lessons, online resources, libraries and other learning delivery methods (TEP, 2020). However, these are private schools. Over 70% of the primary in-school population of Nigeria attend public school (Varrella, 2020).

The 6<sup>th</sup> round of the COVID-19 Impact monitoring report by the National Bureau of Statistics shows that about 45% of school-aged household members during school closures did not engage in any learning during that period. A majority of the 55% who engaged in learning were from wealthier households (NBS, 2020). The low rate of effective home learning during the Covid-19 crisis shows the ripple effect of crisis on the education system, where the reality of society and development extremely hampers responses. It also emphasizes the socio-economic divide and the deepening of the education gap due to a lack of resources, especially among poorer households (NBS, 2020). Therefore, there is a clear need to embrace newer unconventional methods that adopt the use of technology to strengthen the education system in Nigeria in the face of crisis and beyond. This paper focuses on the effect of covid-19 on primary education, the responses to the crisis, challenges faced by interventions, and recommendations for change. These recommendations are primarily aimed at the Ministry of Education at the National level to address the inflexibility of the primary education system in Nigeria in the face of crisis and its effects.

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#### *PRIMARY EDUCATION INTERVENTION DURING COVID-19*

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In partnership with national Non-Governmental and International organizations, several states responded in a bid to address and reduce the learning disruption caused by the Covid-19 crisis by implementing home learning strategies across the country. The Education Partnership Centre surveyed 101 government officials across 22 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). According to the learning in a pandemic report by TEP, 16% of the officials reported that their States were not implementing any learning alternatives for students, while 84% reported that their states provided learning alternatives during the pandemic (TEP, 2020). The main objective of the strategies implemented across states was to mitigate the impact of school closure on the learning and well-being of learners, teachers, etc., through alternative solutions.

Some implementing states, partners and initiatives include: the Nigeria Education Sector COVID-19 Response Strategy, centrally coordinated by UNICEF and save the children (EIEWG, 2020) for the North East, Bauchi State (in partnership with USAID), Ogun State in partnership with Teach for Nigeria, Lagos state's strategy for continued learning, implemented by the Ministry of

Education, and others (Kaaluu, 2020). These interventions all had the same motive of mitigating the impact of school closures through the provision of recorded lessons for students broadcasted on the TV and Radio across the states. These modes of dissemination were seen to most likely be the quickest response and have the most expansive reach by many of the states (TEP, 2020). This was done to aid continued learning while at home. Although most states utilized TVs and Radios as their major mode of circulating teaching material, Edo State took a different approach. The State's response to the crisis was an initiative called Edobest@Home. It is a state-based initiative by Edo State, which utilized the use of mobile phones for public primary schools to aid learning at home (Emenyonu, 2020). The case study below will further discuss this.

The effectiveness of home learning strategies is dependent on some factors. The already existing challenges of vulnerable individuals only served to intensify the effect of the crisis. Homeschooling with limited technology, and the current state of households, especially among disadvantaged individuals, faces significant challenges. Primarily, poverty is a major factor. According to a 2019 Poverty and Inequality in Nigeria: Executive Summary by the National Bureau of Statistics, over 40% of the Nigerian population are classified as poor (NBS, 2020). The use of low-technology solutions were the major drivers of the strategies adopted across the country. It is therefore paramount to have access to devices and the surrounding factors needed for their effective operation. As basic as Television and Radio sound, they are not readily available in all households, and where they are, the local power supply is unreliable (Ladipo & Adebiori, 2020). The instability of the power supply makes the use of technology in this manner difficult. The broadcasting of programs at particular hours of the day does not factor in the unpredictability of the power supply and the availability of devices. Additionally, due to the limited financial resources of most households, not all houses have generators, and where they are available, fuel prices need to be considered and their use reserved.

Furthermore, effective homeschooling, especially with primary school students, requires a level of cooperation between teachers, learners, and parents (EIEWG, 2020). Mainly because it is the basic level of education, and learning requires guidance. Radio and TV broadcasts do not create a direct channel for communication with teachers. In the baseline round of the covid-19 impact survey carried out by the National Bureau of Statistics, 81% of the households reported that they had no form of contact with teachers (NBS, 2020). This would require students to depend on their parents

for help in most cases with their learning. There is a high percentage of illiteracy among the parents, especially in poorer and more vulnerable communities. This leaves them in a position of being able to provide little to no help. Assessment is challenging within this system. Therefore, learning outcomes defer, and it is not easy to monitor progress and effectiveness of the lessons, due to it being a one channel of communication network.

The girl child is also disadvantaged, as there is a possibility of her presence at home, resulting in more significant household chores and responsibilities. This is a result of the orientation of households on the place and position of the girl child in the home. Additionally, a report on gender-based violence during the covid-19 crisis by the United Nations' showed an increase in the rate of child marriage as a result of the crisis, which also disrupted learning (UN, 2020). This was because of not physically being present in school and the financial state of some households. Furthermore, another impacted group are children with special needs and disabilities. They are also hugely disadvantaged (Samuel, 2020). They require special attention that caters to their unique needs. The system of learning implemented lacks the necessary tools needed for this. Also, children with disabilities from lower-income backgrounds are even more at a disadvantage. As stated above, many students were not involved in any form of learning during the lockdown, and a majority of those involved were from private schools and richer households. The lack of resources, socio-economic constraints, and little to no technology involved in the current public primary education system made the adaptation of new learning methods extremely challenging.

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*CASE-STUDY: EDO-BEST @HOME: USE OF MOBILE PHONES FOR LEARNING*

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Edo State tried a different approach to mitigate the effect of the Covid-19 crisis on the primary public school education sector. As a response to the Covid-19 crisis, Edo state launched Edo-



BEST@Home, a mobile-based remote learning programme that extends the pre-existing Edo Basic Education Sector Transformation (Edo-BEST) programme. Data from the demographic and health survey revealed that mobile phones were the most prevalent devices within the state.

Therefore, the State decided to utilize the growing use of mobile phones to support home learning (Munoz-Najar & Oviawe, 2020). Consequently, the implemented delivery methods combine WhatsApp, interactive text messages, and the Edo-BEST@Home web platform. The programme includes interactive audio lessons, digital self-study activity packets, digital storybooks, mobile interactive quizzes, learning guides for parents, and virtual classrooms that enable interaction between teachers and students. Furthermore, in partnership with MTN the programme was made Data-free by the state (Emenyonu, 2020). This makes it accessible to low-income earners who struggle with internet accessibility due to a lack of funds. The programme focuses on providing engaging content aligned with the curriculum, teacher support, mode of assessment and virtual training for teachers.

The flexibility and quick adaptability of the Edobest programme to a remote learning solution in the face of the covid-19 crisis, can be attributed to the fact that it had an existing education model which was primarily technology-based already in place. The State and its partner organization had already trained over 11000 teachers to deliver lessons through technology, which proved helpful in the face of crisis. The programme reached approximately 900 out of Edo's 1 000 primary schools and created over 7000 virtual classrooms out of 9000 actual classrooms to deliver remote education (Munoz-Najar & Oviawe, 2020). However, it is important to note that the programme also faces certain challenges in its delivery that require solutions. One major challenge is that parents are not always at home, limiting the access the children had to mobile phones.

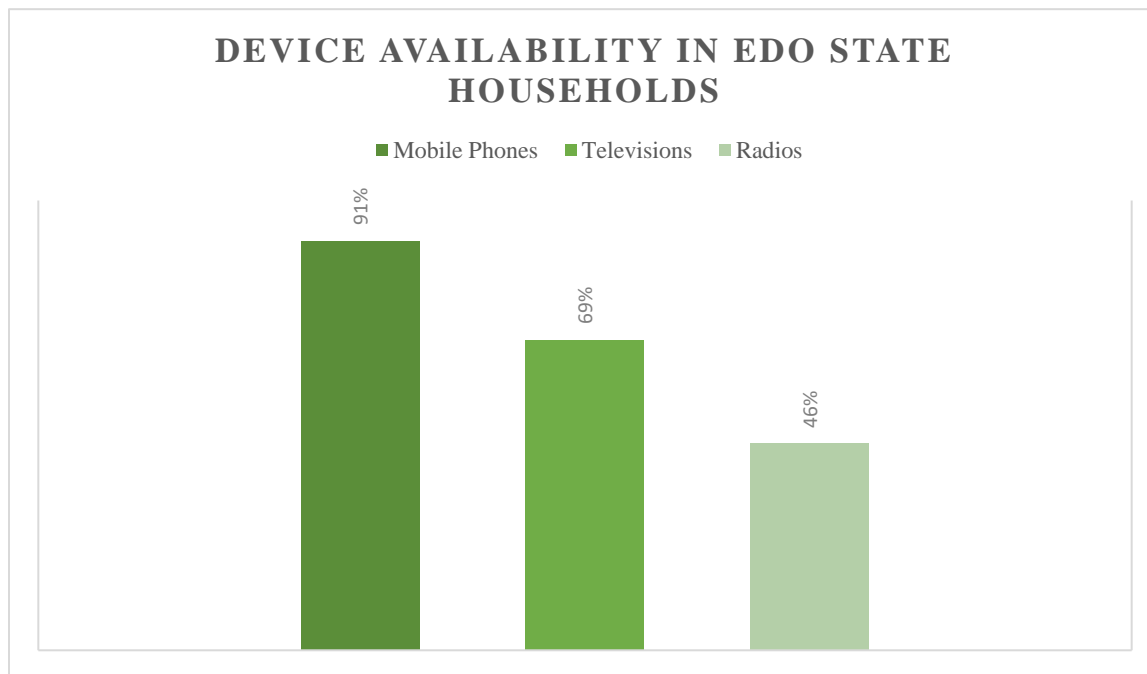
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### *POVERTY AND ACCESS TO EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS*

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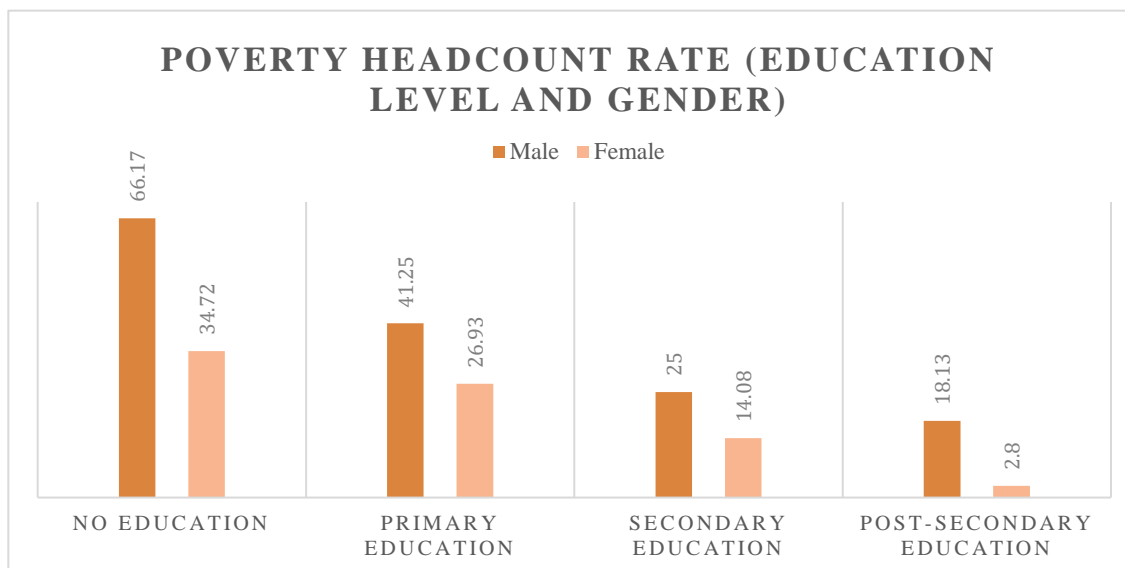
The long period of inhibited learning, due to the crisis, had an impact on the out-of-school rate, among other things. Before the Covid-19 crisis, there was already a massive challenge with the number of children not enrolled in school. About 10.5 million of the country's children aged 5-14 years were recorded not in school (UNICEF, 2017). At the end of 2020, children across the country returned to school, following the government's clearance to do so. However, there was a

considerable decline in the number of students who returned to school. Among household members aged 5-18 years, 59% were attending school in October 2020 compared to 74% in January/February 2019 (NBS, 2020). This means there is an increase in the already high out-of-school population rate in Nigeria. Among the reasons for the decline in the number of returning students was a financial constraint, which is logical because of the effect of the crisis on the economy and household income and living standards.



A survey carried out by the National Bureau of Statistics in Kano, Lagos, FCT and Rivers, showed a decline in household incomes, which has created a state of deeper economic vulnerability (World Bank Poverty Team, 2020). The long period of inhibited learning due to the crisis, has resulted in the demotivation to continue learning for some children. Education is not a priority to some, and the benefits of not being in school outweigh the benefit of remaining in school. This is very problematic for the students and the country at large.

According to the NBS, the poverty rate is higher depending on the level of education completed (NBS, 2020). Therefore, a decision to not complete education can increase the chances of an individual falling within the poverty gap due to limited opportunity. It is therefore paramount to encourage education for the general growth and development of individuals and the country.




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### *RECOMMENDATIONS*

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#### **1. Leverage on the spread of use of Mobile Telephones**

Nigeria has the 7th highest number of mobile phone users in the world. More impressively, the country currently has 128 million mobile internet subscriptions (Ogunde, 2020). The large number of mobile phones across the country, can be utilized as a low-cost solution, scalable nationally used in the delivery of uniform quality education. The government can create a free database and interactive learning platform in partnership with skilled multi-level stakeholders. It should provide high-quality, engaging and interactive localized digital content based on the curriculum.

It will be beneficial to individuals that have access to mobile phones in low-income households, disadvantaged communities, out-of-school children, and the education system at large. Most importantly, it will provide a cushion for the education system in the face of crisis, as disruption in the learning process will be limited. The consciousness of using technology in learning will help

a large number of children embrace the global shift from traditional learning methods. Taking cues from the Edobest state-level initiative, a change towards a new system that utilizes technology can be very beneficial to the quality of education in public schools, and their ability to adapt and evolve in crisis.

A technology-based method of delivery, with effective monitoring and evaluation, can provide insight around areas where resources and devices are not being utilized or available. It will aid in research on developing alternative solutions, and effective adaptation of other devices and technology. It will also give insight and support in the decision-making process of where more resources need to be expended.

## **2. Focus on Rural areas**

Although the number and use of mobile phones are largely increasing in Nigeria, not every household has access to these devices. Many households, especially in rural areas and underserved communities, still do not have access to mobile phones, internet or electricity. In northeast Nigeria, there are currently over 1.9 million displaced individuals due to internal conflict. 60% of them are children, with 1 in 4 under the age of five (UNICEF, 2020). Consequently, alternative interactive learning solutions still need to be developed for children without reach and access. Resources should be mobilized by the government and allocated to research and develop cost-effective low and high-level technology solutions for individuals without reach in rural areas and disadvantaged communities such as IDP camps. These solutions should be able to work in areas with very limited resources.

An example of an initiative that operates in resource-constrained areas is “CAN'T WAIT TO LEARN”; a fast, effective and low-cost programme created by [War Child](#) . It provides a solution to close the education gap for millions of children in formal schools and out-of-school settings. The programme offers children affected by conflict the opportunity to (continue to) learn to read and count through playing educational games played on tablet devices. (War Child, 2020). Solar-powered charging stations are present at each location to ensure that the tablets are fully charged and ready for every session where electricity is not available. Up to 4 children can utilize each tablet at a time (War Child, 2020). Teachers and facilitators are trained to support the children in the programme. It has a system that can operate in areas with limited resources, and all game

content is based on government-approved school curricula. Since its launch in 2012, it has expanded and is being used across six countries (War Child, 2020).

Instant Network Schools is another example of an initiative to provide technology-based learning in resource-constrained environments. It is characterized as "a digital school in a box" with a swift set up process. A school consists of 25 tablets for the students, a laptop for the teacher, a projector, a speaker, 3G connectivity/WiFi router to connect to the internet, an inbuilt charging solution to recharge all tablets and laptop simultaneously and Cables (Vodafone Foundation, 2019). It provides young refugees, and their teachers access to digital learning content and the internet to effectively function. It was set up in 2013 by Vodafone Foundation and is now in partnership with UNHCR. 36 Instant Network schools across eight refugee camps have benefited over 86,500 refugee students and 1,000 teachers to date. It has a goal of reaching 500,000 young refugees by 2025 (Vodafone Foundation, 2019).

Community-based initiatives such as these that largely incorporate technology will benefit the in-school and the out-of-school population of primary-level learners across the country. Innovative interventions that function within areas with limited resources will have a huge impact on the education system because children not in school will also have the opportunity to learn. The government mobilizing resources towards research, development and scaling of technology-based solutions will equip young individuals with digital skills and increases potential employment opportunities.

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## *CONCLUSION*

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Investment in quality education generates intergeneration paybacks across all dimensions of sustainable development (Mushi & Makauki, 2010). Intensive large scale research needs to be carried out to identify new scalable, cost-effective methods and technologies to achieve better learning outcomes for primary level children across the country. There is a need to conceptualize and implement innovative ideas and policies that shift from traditional methods and narratives. This should be done not just as a response to crisis and its effects, but to produce a new reimagined future for basic education that is effective across board, and bridges the gaps and disparities within the current system, ensuring sustainable quality education for all.

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#### **4. QUALITY CONTROL AND DATA PROTECTION**

To ensure quality data collection and entry. All team members (including supervisors and research assistants) will be thoroughly briefed and trained before fieldwork in each location. Throughout the fieldwork, transcription, and coding of data will be undertaken within 48 hours of data collection. Research assistants will also be required to keep a field journal which will be submitted at the end of data collection in each region. Research assistants will report to the regional supervisor, who in turn reports to the Consultant. On-spot and back checking processes will be conducted by regional field supervisors and the consultant. Data collected on the field will be uploaded each day to a secured server using Amazon Cloud to prevent data loss.

#### **5. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.**

For ethical consideration, participation in the study will be voluntary. Respondents will be briefed on the purpose and benefit of the study, and verbal consent obtained before commencing interviews. Respondents will also be assured confidentiality of their identities –

that their real identities will not be disclosed, all of which will be conducted by well-trained Research Assistants.